

OPEN FORUM

Restore Tahoe's forests to keep the lake blue

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Lake Tahoe, a jewel in the crown of the Sierra, is now threatened because fires could ravage forests around the lake and destroy the fabled clarity of its water.

The threat began to take shape in the 19th century, when the lake was ringed with open ponderosa pine woodlands maintained by frequent low-severity fires. Beginning in the 1850s, the big pines were logged to provide timber for mines and railroads, and fires were suppressed with growing efficiency. The forests that grew back were dominated by dense stands of white fir, many of which have succumbed to drought and insect attack in recent decades.

The unhealthy forests around Lake Tahoe fit the popular notion of a forest as a cool, dense screen providing privacy and seclusion. A wildfire in the Lake Tahoe Basin, however, would no longer be mild and restorative, but fierce and destructive, racing through treetops and devastating entire landscapes. It would also cook the soils, leaving them vulnerable to post-fire rains washing sediment into the lake.

The U.S. Forest Service manages 80 percent of the land in the Lake Tahoe Basin, some 165,000 acres. We work closely with partners, and our coordination has improved in recent years with help from Pathway 2007, a collaborative process that charts a mutual course for the future of the basin. Pathway partners include the Tahoe Regional Planning Agency, Lahontan Regional Water Quality Control Board and the Nevada Division of Environmental Protection.

Since 1987, the Forest Service has worked to restore forests in the basin. So far, we have thinned about half the area at greatest risk; about 42,000 acres still await initial treatment. Some people have opposed our work to reduce forest density, citing noise, truck traffic, smoke from prescribed fires and other concerns. But wildfires in 2002 and 2003 raised public awareness of fire danger and boosted support for restoring forests to their historical natural condition.

Public appeals and litigation, though rare in the Lake Tahoe Basin, are common enough in Southern California and nationwide, to force delays in project implementation. Planners go to great lengths to "bulletproof" projects in case they go to court, spending time and resources that might otherwise go to getting results on the ground. The Forest Service is using new authorities under the Healthy Forests Initiative and Healthy Forests Restoration Act of 2003 to modernize our processes, eliminate excessive environmental studies and

encourage local restoration initiatives through stewardship contracts and community fire protection plans.

Federal restoration funds are limited, and treatment costs in the Lake Tahoe Basin are some of the highest in the nation -- about \$2,000 per acre, compared to the national average of about \$110 per acre. Fortunately, the Forest Service has been able to tap funds from public land sales under the Southern Nevada Public Lands Management Act of 1998 and use them in the Lake Tahoe Basin. However, treated lands will need follow-up work every 10 to 20 years to control accumulating brush, and it is unclear where the money will come from.

A possible source of additional funding is the material culled from thinned forests. The Forest Service's approach is to leave all the trees that a healthy forest needs and to remove the excess, selling what we can to help offset restoration costs. Our research-and-development staff has found a number of uses for the small trees and woody biomass that we typically remove, ranging from structural lumber, to flooring and paneling, to pulp and biofuels. Local biomass, for example, will go to Lake Tahoe High School, which received a grant for a new boiler to convert woody waste into heat. Of course, there is far more material on the ground than can be cost-effectively removed; we will still need to safely burn some biomass in piles to reduce fire danger.

The Lake Tahoe Basin is unique -- but its problems are not. Thousands of communities nationwide face similar fire dangers, the symptoms of long-term forest health decline. As a nation, we need to rise above old debates about timber and roads and focus on the threats that really matter. Treating fuels and restoring forests are really one and the same: both are opportunities for bringing people together based on a mutual desire for thriving communities and healthy, resilient forest ecosystems. Collaborative community-based forestry is key.

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